

WORKING TO SUSTAIN FLORIDA'S RURAL AND  
NATURAL LANDS: A CALL TO ACTION  
*By Nathaniel P. Reed, Chairman Emeritus*  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is projected that if current growth and development patterns continue, by 2060 Florida's population will double to 36 million people, the amount of urbanized land will also double, and roughly seven million acres of Florida land will be converted from rural to urban uses. This dramatic conversion of Florida's working and natural lands provide an unacceptable and unsustainable picture of how we should accommodate the expected population growth.

The time is now to issue a clarion call for change. It is imperative that citizens and their leaders seek holistic, interconnected solutions that can protect natural, rural and working lands in Florida. Here are but some of the possible components:

## VISIONING AND PUBLIC POLICY

- Establish an alternative landscape vision for Florida.
- Base this statewide vision on holistic, regional visioning.
- Create a comprehensive state rural lands policy.

## ECONOMIC STRATEGIES

- Embrace the market by identifying multiple layers of value for rural lands and developing strategies for compensation for protecting those values.
- Provide additional density only to accomplish public benefits.
- Support agriculture.
- Promote compatible rural economic development.
- Redirect state infrastructure expenditures toward rebuilding Florida's cities.

## PLANNING STRATEGIES

- Improve existing land protection strategies.
- Refine Florida's Rural Land Stewardship Program.
- Make additional refinements to Florida's growth management process.
- Expand and improve public land acquisition.

## CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

- Engage and educate the public.

If we are to succeed in better protecting Florida's rural and natural lands, it will take tremendous vision, leadership and perseverance. If we follow a "do nothing" scenario, in a little more than half of a century, the natural beauty and rich heritage of Florida will be lost forever. This is not the legacy we wish to leave to our children and grandchildren. We must act now.



# WORKING TO SUSTAIN FLORIDA'S RURAL AND NATURAL LANDS: A CALL TO ACTION

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A study released by 1000 Friends of Florida in 2006 projects that, if Florida continues with current growth and development patterns, by 2060 this state's population will double to 36 million people, and that the amount of urbanized land will also double. *Florida 2060: A Population Distribution Scenario for the State of Florida* also includes the projection that roughly seven million additional acres of Florida land will be converted from rural to urban uses—including approximately 2.7 million acres of agricultural lands and another 2.7 million acres of native habitat.

This dramatic conversion of significant amounts of Florida's working and natural lands provides an unacceptable and unsustainable picture of how we should accommodate the expected population growth. Some would suggest that the 2060 picture is not the worst case scenario—rather it represents a “do nothing scenario.”

Doing nothing is clearly unacceptable. The time is now to issue a clarion call for change. Together we must acknowledge that we are not on a sustainable course in terms of the future of Florida's rural and natural lands. It is imperative that citizens and their leaders seek holistic, interconnected solutions that can protect natural, rural and working lands in Florida. Here are but some of the possible components:

## VISIONING AND PUBLIC POLICY

### Establish an Alternative Landscape Vision for Florida

Together we must establish a shared and clear alternative landscape vision for the future of Florida—one that includes policy goals for the protection of working and natural lands. If it is to be successful, we must engage the people of Florida in developing this vision that addresses where we are going to put people and what lands we are going to conserve. This state landscape vision must necessarily look at large scale land design, including land inside urban boundaries.

To succeed, the state landscape vision must be supported by investments and programs at the local, regional, state and federal levels. Success in guiding Florida's sustainable future requires a vision that protects the state's ecosystems, promotes more efficient use of land (including compact use and higher densities where appropriate), ensures opportunities for a viable agricultural economy and working lands, and promotes vital rural communities. Transportation and other infrastructure investment plans should flow from the vision, rather than drive it. The implementation effort should support and produce development patterns that are consistent with the vision.



## Base the Statewide Landscape Vision on Holistic Regional Visioning

Current planning in Florida is conducted primarily county-by-county rather than on ecosystem-based regions. This promotes the fragmentation of watersheds, wildlife corridors and other natural systems. It also can promote patchwork urban development as counties have not traditionally coordinated effectively with each other on the placement of new towns and other new development.

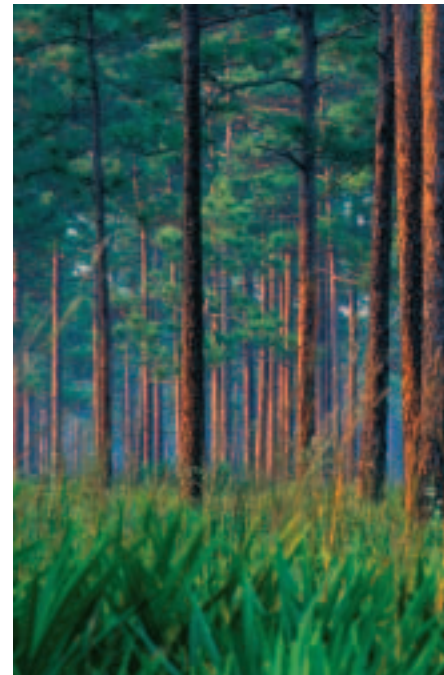
Instead of this piecemeal approach, regional visioning, with broad community engagement, should frame and form the foundation for the state vision. These regional visions should not be constrained by political or market boundaries, should be large scale and farsighted, and should focus on celebrating each region's distinctive character. The visions should also promote the continuity and connectivity of the region's natural systems, and address appropriate placement for new development.

Instead of merely protecting things from growth, the regional vision should address what it is the residents want. For example, in Central Florida, this could include a large area that would include natural, rural and working agricultural and forestry lands, and perhaps some judiciously placed new towns that would all be planned to protect the connectivity in both the natural and built systems. This must be undertaken prudently and carefully to avoid inducing more sprawl, and to ensure that the associated infrastructure is compatible with the regional vision.

## Create a Comprehensive State Rural Lands Policy

When Florida's growth management system was enacted in 1985, agricultural lands were not seriously addressed. As a result, today's growth management process focuses primarily on promoting more orderly patterns of growth in and around developed areas and limiting leapfrogging development in rural lands. The primary tool for protecting rural lands has been to allow low density development with 1 house per 5 or 10 acres, and in some cases even lower densities. In more urbanized parts of the state, this has resulted in sprawling subdivisions. In some rural areas, it has provided for a "holding pattern" until either market conditions change to allow such development or a plan amendment is approved to allow more dense development. Making matters worse, when Florida's growth management system was adopted, there was already in place sprawling land use patterns in rural areas that became "vested" under the new system.

The *Florida 2060* "do nothing" scenario displays the results of continuing these patterns of development. This starkly reveals the absence of a meaningful policy regarding the protection of rural and natural lands. This must be rectified.



It must be economically viable for Florida's working lands to remain in agriculture, and for this to happen, we must embrace the market. Florida must adopt more innovative ways to leverage the economic engine of growth, creating value by linking together community development, agriculture and conservation. This effort must be informed and supported by active public engagement.

We also must do a better job of defining what rural character is. Agriculture has long been a cornerstone of Florida's history, culture and economy. Do we envision this role continuing in the future? If so, how do we maintain the viability of agriculture in the face of the overwhelming pressures to develop these lands? And what type and level of development is compatible with maintaining rural character? When do we reach a tipping point whereby the rural character is forever lost? These and other questions must be thoroughly addressed.

Together, we must craft public policy that enables a profitable and sustainable agricultural sector. Open, candid discussion among key interests is needed to make progress together in clearly and collectively establishing the vision and defining the goals of what we want to achieve in terms of Florida's rural and natural lands. The resulting policies should be framed by respect for private property rights and support for land stewardship provided by the agricultural and forestry sectors as a public good.

## ECONOMIC STRATEGIES

### Embrace the Market

It must be economically viable for Florida's working lands to remain in agriculture, and for this to happen, we must embrace the market. Florida must adopt more innovative ways to leverage the economic engine of growth, creating value by linking together community development, agriculture and conservation. This effort must be informed and supported by active public engagement.

As an unintended consequence of our growth management system, most agricultural land in Florida today has higher value for development than for agriculture. This is largely because our system views agriculture as merely a holding zone awaiting eventual conversion to urban development. This is not sustainable since, with this model, we will end up with no land that is available for agricultural uses. If we are to have significant lands available for agricultural use, we must employ innovative strategies to ensure that: 1) Agriculture, not development, is the highest and best use of the land; and, 2) Revenue from agricultural products and services exceeds the costs of bringing the products to market. Only then will it be worthwhile for farmers to keep their lands in agricultural use.

**Identify Multiple Layers of Value**—If agriculture is to remain profitable, we must “add value” to farming. Integral to this is to begin to view natural and agricultural lands as having multiple layers of value. These lands can provide water recharge and storage, sequestration of carbon and protection of valuable ecosystems and open space. As an important component of Florida's heritage, our natural and rural lands provide abundant ecotourism and educational

opportunities. Additionally, agricultural lands can and do play a primary role in mitigating development impacts by providing a critical buffer between developed and natural lands.

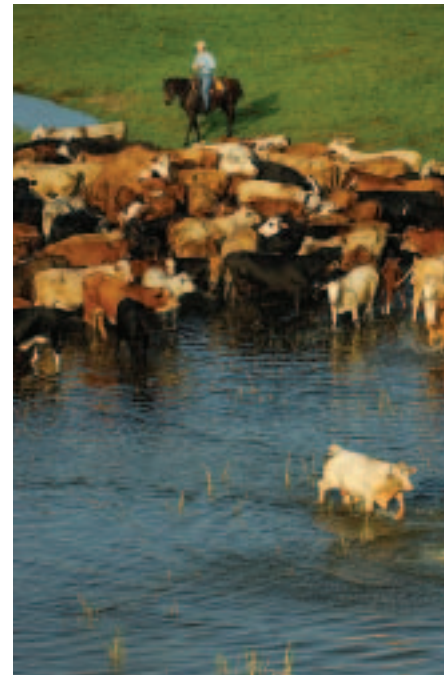
**Develop Incentives for Protecting Those Values**—Incentives should be developed for landowners who safeguard open space values and ecosystem services that are not protected under current regulations and programs. In return, a framework in law must be established that clearly identifies what is of value, how to assess that value, how to compensate for that value, and how to ensure the continued protection of that value. This framework needs to provide the public with a strong level of confidence that it is supporting fair payment for those services. In addition to confidence in this process, the public must also have confidence that the government will ensure compliance with the law.

A variety of incentives might be made available to landowners to maintain these lands. New options might include encouraging farmers to “grow” water and other ecosystem services as “crops.” Landowners could be compensated in some manner for such services as water management, carbon sequestration, open space protection, and other ecosystem protection values. As an example, the agricultural sector could provide part of the solution to the state’s water issues for temporary and permanent water storage, water recharge, wetlands protection, and other issues. In another example, waste management systems could look first to agricultural lands as the preferred place for recycling certain types of wastes that would be compatible with agricultural production, thereby reducing cost to both residents and agricultural producers.

Other alternatives should also be evaluated. Already in place, mitigation banking can help unlock wetland values. The mitigation banking process should be evaluated to ensure that it results in the protection of sustainable wetland systems. New, more effective approaches also need to be evaluated and implemented. Tradable water credits, within the same basin, could be a viable component. We also need to evaluate whether tax credit programs for land conservation could be fashioned as a workable concept in a state without an income tax.

## Provide Additional Density Only to Accomplish Public Benefits

The public needs to recognize and appreciate that the value produced by development is actually a powerful tool that can help to protect natural, rural and working agricultural lands. Florida’s growth management process must be refined to provide that decisions about the location and density of development are part of the interconnected solutions that can accommodate future populations and protect natural, rural and working landscapes.





The crops of today may not meet the needs of tomorrow. We must recognize that agriculture is always redesigning itself. Strategies should be directed not toward protecting a particular crop, but rather toward protecting the opportunity for agriculture, so that as new technology and needs emerge, the land is still available.

A fundamental problem under our current system is that most rural land in Florida has higher value for development than for agriculture or open space. However, the same type of land use regulation that created this scenario could instead be redirected to create value that could support natural, rural and working agricultural and forestry lands protection by allowing the conversion of rural land to urban density only in return for providing public benefit. Such public benefit should include the permanent preservation of natural and agricultural lands and open space. For example, the comprehensive plan for Sarasota County, *Sarasota 2050*, grants density bonuses to landowners who preserve agriculture, environmentally sensitive lands and open space and build walkable, mixed use, compact communities in appropriate locations.

The trade-off for permanently protected rural lands may include judiciously placed and well-planned new towns and some increases in overall density if done with care to be compatible with the area's existing rural character. This policy should also support a built environment that connects communities to each other, be fiscally neutral to existing residents, and support higher density development to minimize the land consumed by population growth. These concepts are fleshed out in greater detail in 1000 Friends of Florida's 2006 report, *A Time for Leadership*, available at [www.1000friendsofflorida.org](http://www.1000friendsofflorida.org).

Opportunities need to be provided that will allow rural landowners to join in developing a broader public and private strategy for addressing the appropriate placement and timing of Florida's future growth and development. This strategy should protect natural and rural lands for the long run, ensure opportunities for continuing agriculture and working lands, and promote vital rural communities.

## Support Agriculture

Since Territorial times, agriculture has been a cornerstone of Florida's economy and heritage. It is hard, if not impossible, to imagine a Florida without agriculture. But it is doubtful that agriculture as we know it today can survive economically if it continues to experience unrelenting pressures from adverse weather events, pests and diseases, rising land values, global competition, and other economic factors.

There are two primary components to the viability of agriculture in Florida: first, the value of the land, which has been discussed above; and second, the profitability of the agriculture. Even if we develop successful strategies to protect agricultural land, this will not necessarily ensure a profitable agricultural industry in Florida. The crops of today may not meet the needs of tomorrow. We must recognize that agriculture is always redesigning itself. Strategies should be directed not toward protecting a particular crop, but rather toward protecting the opportunity for agriculture, so that as new technology and needs emerge, the land is still available. We must clarify how a sustainable agriculture



sector in Florida can be part of our future. With food security issues increasing, this is a growing concern.

Flexibility and research-based innovation will be the key to success and sustainability. Because of energy costs, regional and premium markets may become more important. As agricultural lands disappear, it will mean farming more intensively on less acreage than in the past, and inventing and utilizing new technologies. Green house production, aquaculture, “farm to fuel” and other alternatives hold potential too. There should be greater public funding for applied research that can evaluate and help implement new opportunities.

The sense of land stewardship and heritage among Florida’s farmers is a strongly held value. They must participate in helping to develop the landscape vision and the viable strategies to protect Florida’s working lands. They must also take a leadership role in educating the public on the value and importance of a healthy agricultural sector. We want to provide the opportunity for agriculture to remain viable, with farmers keeping and managing their lands.



## Promote Compatible Rural Economic Development

We also must recognize the role of compatible economic development in rural areas. Some parts of rural Florida have not shared in the state’s relative prosperity, and are in need of new businesses and jobs. In some communities, strategies to revitalize small towns, promote heritage and eco-tourism, and facilitate the creation of businesses that support agricultural needs may be merited. In other areas, the judicious placement of new towns may be appropriate, as long as they are done in a manner compatible with the area’s rural character.

## Redirect State Infrastructure Expenditures Toward Rebuilding Florida’s Cities

The state provides significant financial subsidies that maintain Florida’s current patterns of development. These include allocating funding for highway construction rather than transit, locating state offices, universities and other public facilities in outlying campuses rather than in downtowns, and other investments that favor sprawl over reinvestment. Instead of subsidizing inappropriate development, the state should prioritize its values consistent with the statewide landscape vision, and use its capital expenditures to help direct growth and development in appropriate urbanized locations. It will be important to develop fiscal and tax policies that support both rural and natural lands and promote the rebuilding of Florida’s cities.

## PLANNING STRATEGIES

### Improve Existing Land Protection Strategies

We also need effective strategies for combining and refining existing tools, such as conservation easements, purchase of development rights (PDRs), and transfer of development rights (TDRs). Each of these programs provides mechanisms to compensate landowners for not developing their land. Each merit careful review, and can serve as an important technique to allow rural lands to remain rural and in private hands.

Conservation easements allow landowners to donate their development rights in return for lower federal income and estate taxes. Some are reluctant to enter into these easements because of the belief that their land values will continue to escalate dramatically if they keep their development options open. The concept of providing additional density only to accomplish public benefits, as described above, could assist in addressing this challenge. Others are exploring the concept of putting land under easement for a set period of time, such as 10 or 20 years, and then allowing development. However, the issue of term easements that offer less than permanent protection as part of a sustainable strategy for protecting natural and rural lands is a challenging one deserving careful evaluation and cautious consideration. One drawback is that these term easements are not eligible for federal tax incentives.

With PDRs, landowners are paid to retire their development rights, but are allowed to continue working their land for agricultural purposes. TDR programs allow landowners in “sending areas” to sell their development rights to “receiving area” landowners. This approach has been largely unsuccessful in Florida because most communities do not have meaningful limitations on development. But again, if the concept of providing additional density only to accomplish public benefit can be successfully applied in Florida, TDR programs have tremendous potential to help slow the conversion of rural lands. To further enhance the effectiveness of TDRs, it will be important to explore how to transfer these rights across municipal and county lines.

### Refine Florida's Rural Land Stewardship Program

Florida's Rural Land Stewardship Program, established in 2004, is another mechanism to protect rural lands. The purpose of the program is to protect rural character by maintaining large tracts of land in agricultural and natural uses while allowing for the judicious placement of appropriate new development. Through the program, rural land stewardship areas (RLSAs) of 10,000 acres or more in size can be established for lands that are predominantly agricultural, rural, open space, or comparable in nature. They can also be established for multi-county areas.



RLSAs are adopted as an overlay on the county's future land use map, and are subject to review by the Florida Department of Community Affairs. The RLSA plan amendment must include a process for visioning, a process for the control of sprawl, innovative planning and development strategies for the area, and a process for adopting zoning and land development regulations to implement the innovative strategies.

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Seven RLSAs, encompassing close to 600,000 acres, are in various stages of review by DCA. In 2003, Collier County adopted a predecessor to the Rural Land Stewardship Program on a tract of land encompassing almost 200,000 acres. Key concepts of that program include a transfer of development rights program to transfer development credits from rural lands to planned new towns, basing the value of the development credits on the environmental values being protected on the rural lands.

There are several major advantages to the Rural Land Stewardship Program. If properly structured, it can promote large-scale, regional planning of rural areas, and provide the opportunity for visioning and innovative planning. It is also intended to protect major conservation areas at no cost to the public.

While the Rural Land Stewardship Program shows potential, there are some issues that need to be addressed. Issues to examine include: new strategies to prevent sprawl and piecemeal development outside of new towns within the RLSA; certainty that the development will proceed as planned and that the protected lands will remain protected in perpetuity; a transparent process to determine how to translate environmental and agricultural value into development credits; and some means to relate conservation land set aside through the RLSA process to the ecologically meaningful systems of open space identified in state conservation plans. Additionally, this is an extremely complex planning process which may prove challenging for counties with limited planning staff to adequately evaluate and implement. A thorough evaluation of the RLSA approach is merited to ensure its success in achieving its legislative intent of furthering the principles of rural sustainability, including: "restoration and maintenance of the economic value of rural land; control of urban sprawl; identification and protection of ecosystems, habitats, and natural resources; promotion of rural economic activity; maintenance of the viability of Florida's agricultural economy; and protection of the character of rural areas of Florida."

## **Make Additional Refinements to Florida's Growth Management Process**

The development of urban and rural areas are inextricably linked. We must interconnect the economies of agriculture, land development and conservation to secure effective solutions. If we are to protect our rural areas, we must make





The scale and focus of land planning also must shift. Instead of focusing on the subdivision and DRI level, planning instead should be addressed at the larger regional landscape level. Instead of being bound only by political or market boundaries, planning should consider watersheds, natural systems and other ecosystem-based regions.

more efficient use of the land. In addition to providing additional density only to accomplish public benefits, conservation easements, PDRs, TDRs, and RLSAs, there are other planning and growth management tools that can assist with the protection of rural lands.

If residents wish for their community to grow in population, sprawl must be replaced by compact use and higher densities in urban areas. It is imperative that we review Florida's growth management process to identify impediments to urban infill and redevelopment. We need to engage the public in every stage of this process, from determining how much growth is appropriate and where, to helping to identify how to make infill and redevelopment compatible with existing patterns of development. We also need to understand and respect that some communities may not wish to continue to grow in population given particular environmental and/or infrastructure limitations. We must recognize that there may be optimal sizes for some communities, and once that size is reached, additional growth cannot be accommodated without seriously impacting the quality of life.

We must also reexamine annexation policies in the context of this vision. Currently, these policies provide incentives for municipalities to take a "Pacman" approach to conversion of rural lands instead of focusing on infill development. This needs to be changed to protect rural lands and the natural areas they buffer. We also need to view annexation as both an intergovernmental and a growth management issue.

The scale and focus of land planning also must shift. Instead of focusing on the subdivision and DRI level, planning instead should be addressed at the larger regional landscape level. Instead of being bound only by political or market boundaries, planning should consider watersheds, natural systems and other ecosystem-based regions.

The appropriate development of new towns should be part of the toolbox; however, this approach should not be seen as a panacea. We need to encourage the adoption of an ecosystem and natural land driven approach to growth management. New towns should emerge connected with this strategy and not just as a slogan. For example, they should be designed to produce internal trip capture to prevent impacts on current residents and the surrounding landscape.

### Expand and Improve Public Land Acquisition

With Preservation 2000, Florida Forever, and numerous local land acquisition programs around the state, Florida has an impressive track record of public acquisition. With land values and development pressures escalating, it is important to increase state funding for acquisition of these natural lands before they

are swallowed up by development. We must support initiatives like the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida's effort to map and protect all remaining significant natural areas. It is also important to map the goals for public land acquisition and protection, with the map being driven by the shared statewide and regional visions described earlier. Only then can the various components of rural land conservation be brought together to protect natural and agricultural landscapes that will be resilient over time.

Understandably, many programs in Florida have focused on environmentally-sensitive lands. But as *Florida 2060* clearly shows, additional emphasis in public land acquisition programs should be placed on protecting agricultural and rural lands. Perhaps equally important is protecting buffer lands to prevent fragmentation of natural systems, and to prevent having urban development abut pristine natural areas. We should also acknowledge that there are certain areas of the state whose preservation is of compelling state interest. However, it is important to identify willing private sellers and use eminent domain only as a last resort.

Florida also needs to support and promote regional and local land acquisition programs. We must develop and implement regional approaches to acquisition programs, and provide greater support for existing local programs. Options might include using state funds to match local acquisition on an acre-by-acre basis.

It is also important to evaluate components of the state land acquisition programs. Some view the appraisal process as broken. We need to create a transparent system that allows owners to receive 100 percent of the value of their property—not more or less. Restoration and management costs should be built into the cost of acquisition. Additionally, in the future we must make sure sufficient funding is allocated for public land management.

We should not necessarily treat natural, agricultural and buffer lands in the same manner. While outright acquisition will be the best tool for some natural lands, agricultural and buffer lands might be better served by less-than-fee mechanisms that allow them to remain as working lands, on the tax rolls, and under private stewardship, while still affording long-term protection from development. Innovative land management strategies, such as continued management by current owners, should be explored. These are also increasingly desirable in light of the rising average cost per acre of acquisition for the state. If we are to meet the large need for land conservation through acquisition and appropriate management, we must fit the right acquisition tools to the right lands.



## CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

### Engage and Educate the Public

If these recommendations are to succeed, it is critical to engage and educate the public. An important component is effective public education. Local communities need to understand and appreciate the public value of lands to be protected. If the public does not understand the benefits derived from working and natural lands, there will be little support for efforts to save them.

If these recommendations are to succeed, it is critical to engage and educate the public. An important component is effective public education. Local communities need to understand and appreciate the public value of lands to be protected. If the public does not understand the benefits derived from working and natural lands, there will be little support for efforts to save them. We must dispel the widely-held myth that rural lands are just a “holding place” for future development. Public willingness to invest in protecting these lands may depend on its perception of what it receives in return for the public investment. A concerted effort must be made to educate the public on the many values of these lands including clean air and fresh drinking water, open space, and others.

People who work the land often have a deep and abiding love for the land. We must find ways to nurture that in others. It is important for the public—and youth in particular—to have direct experiences with the rural and natural lands that we want to protect. Opportunities and programs for recreation, ecotourism, education and other experiences should be expanded.

In establishing a statewide landscape vision, we also must engage the public in a meaningful way. Regional visions and plans based on community engagement are much more likely to be actually implemented, and should form and frame the foundation for a meaningful state landscape vision. We must also recognize that the concept of property rights must be respected. The goal should be to develop an appealing vision that incorporates the protection of working and natural lands, using growth management and planning as tools to accomplish that end.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If we are to succeed in better protecting Florida's rural and natural lands, it will take tremendous vision, leadership, and perseverance. If we follow the “do nothing” scenario depicted in *Florida 2060*, in a little more than half of a century, the natural beauty and rich heritage of Florida will be forever lost. This is not the legacy we wish to leave to our children and grandchildren. We must act now. There is no time to lose.

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